

# On Frequent Flyers and Boat People: Notes on Europe, Crisis, and Human Mobility

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This article is part of the series [Refugees and the Crisis of Europe](#)

At the harbor of Mytilene on the Greek island of Lesbos in the summer of 2014, I was struck by an emblematic scene: a party of tourists debarked from a cruise ship and, heading toward the custom house, walked past a group of immigrants just apprehended at sea. The tourists did not seem to notice the immigrants, despite the fact that their visibility was accentuated by the surgical masks they had been provided—most likely to protect autochthones from some imagined contagion.



Tourists in Mytilene. Photo by Francesco Vacchiano.

The situation seemed a flawless representation of the different speeds of today's world: a compelling portrait of the contemporary power lane, built upon mobility and its control. Through a daisy-chained set of devices, mobility is progressively being constructed as a means of social differentiation and discrimination, a new configuration of power on a global scale. The divide between "frequent flyers" and "boat people" is an enactment of such differentiation, and the daily toll of deaths at the gates of Europe is one of its most dramatic results.

The news today, as I write, is frightening: thirty-eight people missing after the sinking of a wooden boat; at least eleven—mostly children—deceased in other incidents around the Aegean. The most obscene paradox is that they lost their lives trying to reach a place

where, in all probability, they would have been entitled to asylum. It is the same virtual right they shared with the 370 people who died off the Italian island of Lampedusa on October 3, 2013; the 268 Syrian citizens drowned just eight days later; the 800 people deceased between September 10–13, 2014; the 224 people whose boat capsized in Libyan waters just one day after; or the 800 passengers who perished in a shipwreck on April 19, 2015. The list is endless. After the shock, responses always go in the same direction: criminalizing migration and invoking new and more efficient means of control. This contradiction between humanitarian imaginaries and (deadly) migration policies takes on paradoxical features, such as when, after the events of October 3, Italian authorities granted the dead honorary citizenship while charging the survivors with illegal entry.



Photo by Eva Gluszak Castagna, used here courtesy of Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen.

This double bind recurred in May 2015, when the European Commission released its new [European Agenda on Migration](#), a plan aimed at taking “a swift and determined action in response to the human tragedy in the whole of the Mediterranean.” The document proposed to redistribute people among E.U. member states and to increase resettlements from outside Europe, a point that sparked controversies about how many people each state should accept. Despite such humanitarian prescriptions, most of the program is directed at strengthening surveillance and engineering a more efficient machinery of detection and removal.

Most initiatives are justified as fighting trafficking and smugglers—a narrative that disguises border control as an ultimate humanitarian priority. Concurrently, border spectacle (De Genova 2013) contributes to conveying, through images of human excess, the ideas of invasion, predation, and contamination. As a result, a powerful account about scarceness becomes dominant, in which the notion of crisis stands out as a key figure.

Even if we accept that the current influx of people is truly unprecedented—although we should not forget that 672,000 people from the former Yugoslavia applied for asylum in other European countries in 1992—these narratives enable the denial of any residual awareness that, on a continent of 742 million people, human excess is itself a construction. If we trust data provided by the International Organization for Migration, 757,192 persons arrived in the European Union between January and early November 2015. It is unquestionably a significant figure, yet one that corresponds to only 0.15 percent of the estimated five hundred million inhabitants of the Union and a fraction of the refugees hosted in countries like Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iran.

In the richest region of the planet, the idea of scarcity needs to be seriously questioned. Though shortage in social provisions may be real, scarcity's driving force is surely the polarization of riches that has occurred in the last two decades. The great transformation induced by neoliberal policies has led to the collapse of welfare systems, the degradation of working conditions, and the privatization of common resources, leaving European societies less resilient and more agonistic. This is the true nature of the ongoing European crisis: a structural readjustment carried out to produce a massive, and sometimes even exceptional, transfer of resources toward the upper crust of the society—an authentic class struggle from above (Gallino 2012).

It is by no means coincidental that this process has accompanied the fabrication of the European border as a mechanism of social differentiation and subaltern inclusion. The European Commission has stated in various documents that migration should be better “managed” so as to make the most of its productive potential. The recruitment schemes elaborated within the so-called circular migration programs—tailored toward seasonal migrants—are a paramount example of this idea of labor without citizenship, as well as an uncanny recurrence of imperial formations (see Stoler 2012) that legitimated the management of “humans as things” (Roque 2014). In this light, are traffickers' practices really so different?

As a young Pakistani asylum seeker told me some months ago, “If you want something better, you go elsewhere; why can't we?” Like many people in the world, he was looking elsewhere for safety, money, and a possibility to dream. For many people like him, moving at any cost is a form of reparation, a claim for justice in a world of growing imbalances.

## References

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